



A modern makeover

He sailed her in a blazer as a boy, now she's found again and restored. *Dan Houston* meets *Sea Lion's* new owner; photos by *Emily Harris*

“I said we could have a 100ft glassfibre yacht or Grandma’s boat”



Previous page: *Sea Lion* reaches past the lighthouse at Punta de Cala Figuera, Mallorca
Above: Her new carbon rig
Right: *Sea Lion's* chart table. Note signal flag locker



We chased this boat all the way to the Balearics to catch up with her after her restoration at Southampton Yacht Services last summer. She’s an interesting project, and an emotional one, too, for her owner Manuel Champalimaud, a Portuguese lawyer. “I remember sailing this boat, aged about 10, with my mother. We cruised all around Palma and Formentera, and I remember cruising to the south of Portugal and Lisbon wearing a blazer and tie! I had to be properly attired for the journey and was not allowed to touch the wheel! I remember those days when life was simple very well. I’d get in the dinghy and explore remote bays. And we came across many well-known boats, like *Jolie Brise* (the Le Havre Pilot Cutter and Fastnet founder in her Mediterranean period)”

Manuel’s mother, Maria Cristina de Mello, was the first yachtswoman in Portugal to take her Coastal Skipper ticket – “my father did not sail, he liked motor boats”. She passed on to Manuel a love of sailing... and a respect for yachts like *Sea Lion* – the 1951 Abeking & Rasmussen, German-built 67ft (20.4m) yawl designed by Carl Alberg (1901-1986), a Swede who had worked as a designer for John Alden, from after the First World War.

Sea Lion was built for Gilbert Verney, a racing yachtsman who was part of the 32nd America’s Cup syndicate with the S&S-designed *Constellation*.

She arrived in America in 1952 and was raced in local regattas, coming second (on real time) in a Bermuda race, for instance. But Verney abandoned racing in 1955 when his wife died, and he also had to concentrate on rebuilding his paper mill. He remarried, to the tobacco heiress Nancy Reynolds, also a widow, who owned the S&S yacht *Blitzen*. The couple did not need two yachts, so in 1958 *Sea Lion* was sold to Manuel’s mother, who arranged for her to be sailed to Lisbon.

Sea Lion’s crossing from America to Portugal lasted from 10 July to 9 August 1959, including a six-day stopover in the port of Faial, in the Azores. By all accounts, the yacht behaved well in a seaway but even so, they got into heavy weather and a backstay broke. Sérgio Marquis, one of her delivery crew on the passage from New Bedford to Lisbon in 1959, recounted:

“My watch ended and I went to sleep without eating. I was exhausted. Now that the staysail was up with the boat rolling less, together with the purring from the engine, I fell into a deep, deep sleep – the first since leaving land. While I slept, Amaral increased the sail area as the wind abated. When I came back for my watch at midnight, the mainsail, the topsail and the staysail were up. Around us, all was white due to the sea foam and phosphorescence. The imposing and ghostly show lasted until the morning. We sailed 212 miles in one day, which, for a yacht like *Sea Lion*, is quite an accomplishment.

Above: The new interior with saloon table under protective cover. Note the pilot berth to port and one of two comfy chairs to starboard

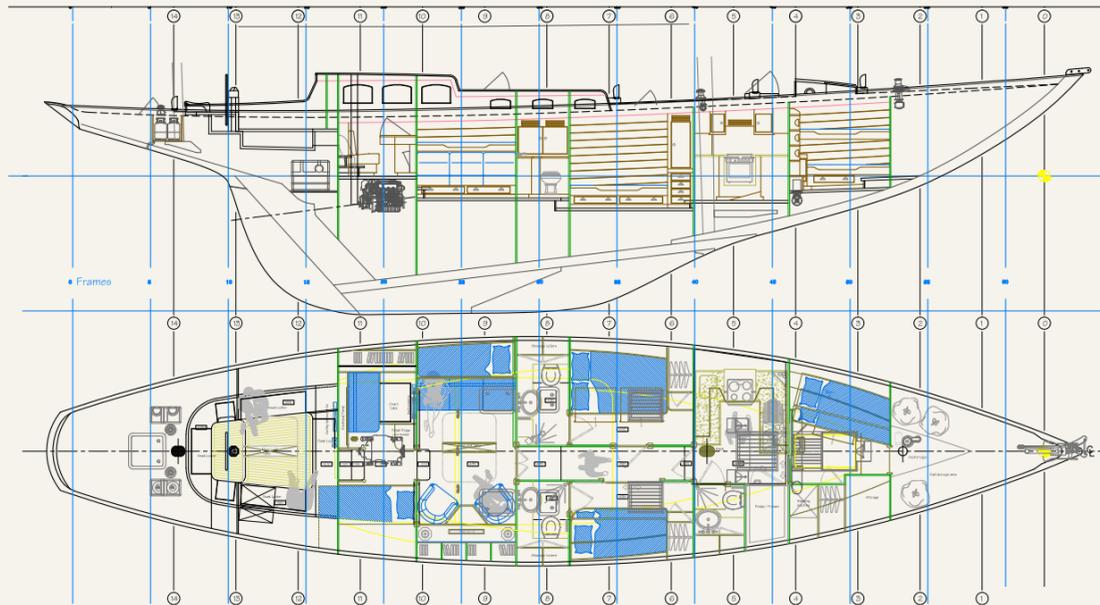
“The yacht was happy and so were we. *Sea Lion* sailed 3,000 miles in 23 days, and we had only used the engine for 13 hours. That was the best trip of my life.”

SHE WAS WELL KEPT

Manuel’s mother kept *Sea Lion* in good condition and sailed her until 1973, when the boat was bought by Arthur Hill, an Englishman who renamed her *Dainty Bess* registering her in Liberia. She ended up in Piraeus, a bit tired and with her engine apparently confiscated by the Greek authorities. This was where, in 1978, Leonidas Vrailas found her, bought her and renamed her again, to *Kompira Sama*. She was altered, with a third cabin added, and put up for charter.

Manuel takes up the story: “One winter night four years ago, I was on the internet looking for a yacht to buy and the pictures came up of this boat. I recognised her, though not her name, which had then changed. So I picked up the phone to Tony Castro, the yacht designer, and he said there was so much interest in classic boats now that I should try to save her.

“I went and chartered her for a few days, but she was in a terrible state. She could not sail in more than seven knots of wind. She had sunk and once been stranded on the shore at Mykonos. But the Ratsey and Laphorn sails were the same ones my mother had ordered 50 years earlier! I thought what the hell am I doing here?”



SEA LION

LOA
67ft (20.4m)

LWL
47ft 10in (14.6m)

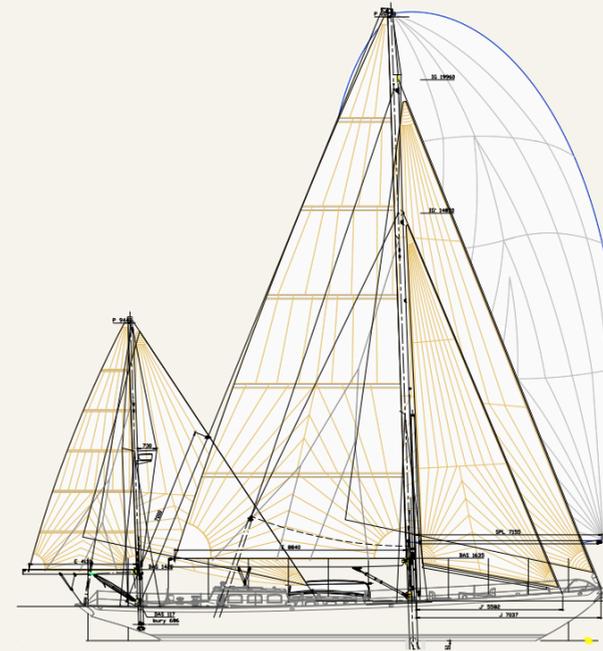
BEAM
15ft (4.6m)

DRAUGHT
9ft 6in (2.9m)

SAIL AREA
2,140sqft (199m²)

DESIGN DISPLACEMENT
66,140lb
(30 tonnes)

DESIGNER / YEAR
Carl Alberg, 1951



New from keel to spars

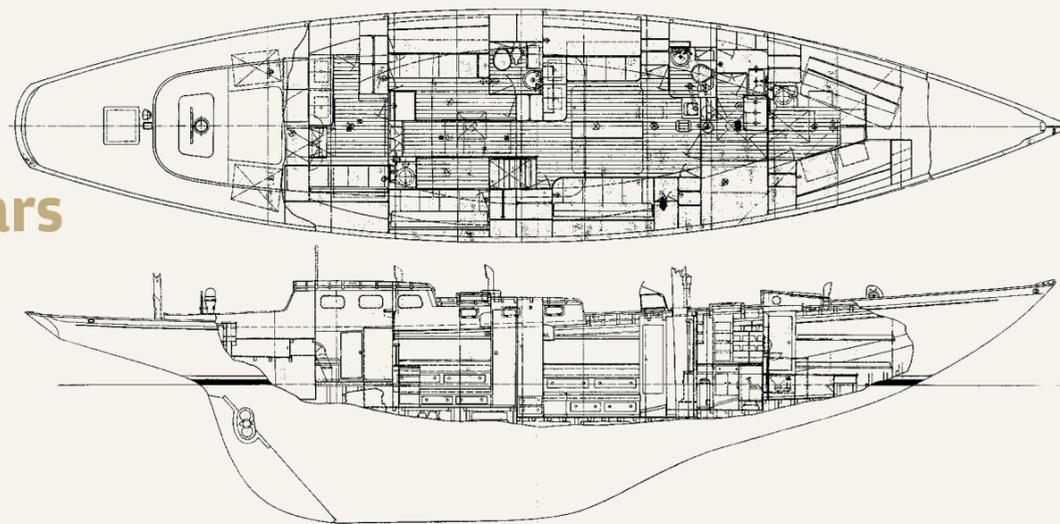
PIERS WILSON, SOUTHAMPTON
YACHT SERVICES

When I first set eyes on *Sea Lion* in Palma, her delivery captain reported that the hull and the deck were both leaking badly, and the rig seemed in a poor state. Hauled out at Port Hamble for surveying, it was clear she had serious problems.

She was transported to Southampton Yacht Services at Saxon Wharf, where we planned the rebuild in four distinct phases: structural work, joinery, technical fitting-out, and the final cosmetic finish.

During the survey, we discovered that many of *Sea Lion's* original steamed oak timbers had fractured and would need replacing. Our shipwright, Derek Browning, decided to remove only a few at a time to preserve her hull shape. He laminated the frames in iroko, as it glues much better than oak, then scarphed the new pieces to the old using 3M's fast cure 5200 adhesive sealant and bronze bolts.

With a fractured mast step and an opening scarp in the keelson, the mainmast had nearly pushed through the bottom of the boat. This part of her original structure was far too weak and needed careful reinforcing, with three new ring frames and



new bronze chainplate foundations to stand the more powerful carbon fibre rig that was going to be installed.

Once the frames were in place, the remaining planking was removed from the hull and three ribbons fitted on each side to keep the frames fair. On the port side, her substantial pine bilge stringer needed major repair where someone had cut a hole for a seacock. It was lucky this had not caused catastrophic hull failure.

We replaced *Sea Lion's* original double planking with a multi-laminate wood hull, formed by gluing two fore and aft mahogany planking layers around two diagonal mahogany veneers, then gluing and screwing this shell to the frames. A thick layer of glass cloth was attached to the outside with epoxy resin to give a waterproof and tough skin.

Marine ply was laid over the existing beams, then overlaid with teak decking and varnished mahogany covering boards.

BEFORE AND AFTER

Top: Designer Tony Castro's new general arrangement
Above: Original plan of *Sea Lion's* accommodation

A new deckhouse was made to the original lines, but with flush skylights for sunbathing. We also moved the mainsheet track to the coachroof, after putting in a stainless steel ring frame beneath to take the load, and the cockpit was then remodelled.

There is very little that you can do to change the arrangement of a boat this size, but designer Tony Castro tweaked the layout to improve comfort for guests and crew. Robbie Cuttress, our 6ft 5in-tall (1.98m) joiner, applied tremendous care to the detail, retaining the fish, sea lion and mermaid motifs in cupboard doors throughout the boat.

BIG CHALLENGE

One big challenge was to fit much more equipment into the same footprint, and this has meant that every inch of space is taken up with piping or electrical cables, tanks, pumps, air conditioning and the like. We used powerful 3D modelling to plan the most efficient pipe and electrical runs. Besides watermakers and plumbing for three bathrooms and the galley, we installed air conditioning, holding tanks, a microwave, a large fridge-freezer cabinet and a washing machine in the fo'c's'le. Electrical power is supplied by the 11kW Onan generating set and a large bank of 24V batteries.

Sea Lion's hull was given a coat of International fairing compounds and a final gloss coat of Awlgrip Cloud White paint. The top of the coachroof had the same treatment, while the cockpit, deckhouse and bulwarks were all varnished with Epifanes single-pack varnish. Below, the mahogany is finished in semi-gloss varnish, with off-white paint on some bulkheads and deckheads.



Top: Owner Manuel Champalimaud at the wheel.
Above left: her sailplan
Above: Piscine ventilation cutouts in her galley lockers

Sea Lion had always been kept by my mother in mint condition – she was a precious yacht. Initially I could not even see that she was *Sea Lion*, the boat of my youth. She had changed and was decrepit; all her systems were worn out. And so I told myself that this was not *Sea Lion*, she was *Kompira Sama*. I had my children with me and they had heard all my stories about *Sea Lion* – I kept a model of the yacht at home. I was telling them this is Grandma's boat and we could have a 100ft (30.5m) glassfibre boat... or this one, and they all said: Grandma's boat. So now, three and a half years later, here we are. I see myself as her guardian – all three children sail, as do the grandchildren, so there is a fourth generation now sailing this boat."

BROUGHT TO THE UK

Sea Lion was delivered under sail to the UK, but at times the pumps were seriously stressed. "When the delivery crew reached the open sea they noticed that the mast was moving up and down with the waves. So they did not dare to hoist the mainsail," Manuel recounts. Deck leaks as well as constant pumping make it sound like a very hard sail indeed. She initially went to Fairlie's on the Hamble, where all her interior needed to be removed before an inspection of her structural timbers could be made.

As the delivery crew could probably have guessed, most of her frames and her timber floors needed replacing where they had cracked and split over the years of hard

“She could make a much better than usual cruising boat”



Above left: One of the en-suite heads/shower-rooms

Above right: Forward starboard cabin with bunks

use in charter and racing. Her mast step had fractured with the joint below it open so wide a hand could be put through it. They found the mast could easily have pushed through the bottom of the boat!

After her condition survey by Fairlie's Duncan Walker, she was taken in to Southampton Yacht Services, where they had restored several classic yachts over the years, including the schooner *Altair*, the Fife III *Belle Aventure* and the J-Class *Velsheda*.

Tony Castro says of seeing *Sea Lion*: “The first thing that surprised me was that she had a much larger beam than I expected. Classic yachts are usually narrow and lack deck space, so this immediately made me think she could make a much better than usual cruising boat.”

He set to planning her detailed reconstruction, principally changing her rig to a modern, lightweight carbon fibre mast and spars, in order to reduce the chance of pitching and rolling. These were made by Southern Spars. “This way, we were going to save about 1,000kg (2,200lbs) aloft,” says Tony. “This would transform the performance and behaviour in a seaway.”

Tony's team also completely redesigned her interior: “The biggest changes were to take the main cabins forward, placing them amidships, and bring the saloon aft, next to the navigation/pilot area. This way, on entering the boat via the companionway hatch, we had a bigger open space ahead and a more spacious feel.

We also improved the galley immensely and added a crew/day heads, albeit small a small one.”

Piers Wilson of SYS took on the project – his last before retirement, he has said. “Piers did a great job and I am thankful that he was there to do it,” Manuel says. “He was always very supportive when we decided to make changes. We ended up keeping only around 20 per cent of her frames, and the interior is all new, as is the deck... She can really be considered a new yacht now.”

Indeed *Sea Lion* and her systems are in showroom condition; there is none of the 1952 patina left.

ON THE WATER

But on the water, of course, the yawl still looks, with her long overhangs, pretty spoon-bow and dishy, American-influenced mid sections, every bit the cruising classic of her 1950s era. You would not notice her Harken gear on deck and her new Hood sails – using Vectran, look as they should. Manuel's crew were furling the gennaker in to tack it, and this made her slightly slow through stays. But she cruises by with a very pleasant hiss through the hull and she picks up speed extremely well. Aboard, the feeling is one of comfort and security. And her easy motion means she will be loved for years to come. 

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